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Shadow Over the Press Corps

The press is fair game, and it should be, and all that. But something nasty is creeping into portrayals of the role of the press in national security affairs, and I don't like it at all.

It got into gear last spring, it seems, with the novel "The Spike" by journalists Arnaud de Borchgrave and Robert Moss. The book popularized the notion of Soviet KGB manipulation of Western media by "disinformation," an activity in which, as in propaganda, a false or incomplete picture is spread but, as not in propaganda, the manipulation is concealed. The dust jacket bore a blurb from former CIA director Richard Helms, the implication being that this was the real McCoy.

Well, it's just a novel, I thought.

Meanwhile, the mails brought a letter from Moss soliciting support for Accuracy in Media, a press-monitoring group. "In my journalistic career," said Moss, who is British, "one of the biggest stories that I have come across is one that the Western news media have, with only a few exceptions, refused to cover. It is the story of how our news media have been used by the Soviet KGB and its satellite intelligence services to manipulate public opinion in the West in order to achieve Moscow's expansionist objectives."

"I personally knew journalists who had been co-opted by the KGB. Intrigued by what I saw going on, I joined forces with my friend, Arnaud de Borchgrave, [then] senior editor and chief foreign correspondent of Newsweek, to do a book on the subject. We did a lot of research. We gained access to the testimony of every major defector from the Soviet bloc intelligence services for the past 20 years—people who can tell, from the inside, how the KGB operates. [We] decided that we would probably reach a larger

number of people with our message if we put it in the form of a novel."

It was curious to me that Moss, as a journalist faced with a truly big story, turned to fiction. But it was good to see him coming out from behind the pages of a novel to make an ostensibly factual statement for which he could be held accountable. Still, I noted, no names were being named.

The other day the matter took a serious turn. In a confidential briefing on El Salvador to foreign diplomats, Secretary of State Alexander M. Haig Jr. said, according to a text published in The New York Times, "The Communist countries are orchestrating an intensive international disinformation campaign to cover their intervention while discrediting the Salvadoran government and American support for that government." He cited "the external disinformation campaign designed to paint the revolutionary effort as distinctively apart from outside interventionist activity." Governmental abuses of power in El Salvador, he observed, "will be dealt with in private interventions—so as not to feed the disinformation programs under way in the U.S. and Europe."

I asked the State Department spokesman what Haig was referring to. He said that since the Haig text had not been officially released, he could not say whether it was accurate. He agreed to call back if he could add anything about the secretary's views on disinformation. No call came.

It is a slightly spooky sequence. Two journalists close to Haig write a novel making a deadly charge of journalistic corruption, and at least one of them carries the charge into the real-life arena. Then—if you take The Times' text as accurate—Haig lends the authority of his office to a version of the same charge, but he does so in less than a public context and declines to emerge further either to offer evidence or to let journalists off the hook.

Certainly most journalists who have worked in Moscow, as I have, would take it for granted that the KGB is doing what it can to blackmail journalists and

play to their political leanings in order to pollute the news. I am prepared to believe that sometimes the KGB succeeds.

But it is mischievous for an official with access to intelligence to suggest that the news is being polluted by a hostile intelligence agency. The blanket nature of the suggestion is troubling. Moreover, it is very different from accusing a journalist of insinuating his political convictions into his work. One does not have to look far in the press corps for a political slant on either the right or the left. But, if it is a slant to the left, that does not make the journalist a pawn or worse, or necessarily an unworthy journalist. Some combination of professionalism, journalistic competition and public scrutiny, I believe, can preserve the public's interest in full and fair news.

An official who, from background cover, casts even a slight shadow of the KGB over the press corps must expect to be asked to show his cards. Otherwise, people may begin to wonder whether he has any better purpose than to manipulate public opinion himself.